

# “Seeing Something Other Than the Ordinary”: An Interview with Robert Wagoner on Life as a Collector of Fine Art

Robert E. Wagoner, Kathryn Blake, and James Tuten  
*Interview, August and September 2020*

Robert E. Wagoner is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Juniata College and an art collector, Kathryn Blake is Director of the Juniata College Museum of Art, and James Tuten is the Charles R. and Shirley A. Knox Professor of History at Juniata College.

From February 20, 2020, to Fall 2020, the Juniata College Museum of Art hosted “The Robert Wagoner Collection.” Divided into two exhibitions, “Art and Identity” and “The Ideal and the Real,” they presented a tantalizing sliver of Wagoner’s promised gift to the Juniata College Museum of Art. The prints and drawings were arranged to spark conversation about human nature and ranged broadly from the fifteenth to the twenty-first centuries, from Europe to the United States.<sup>1</sup> The following interview took place over two sessions, the first during the first week of August 2020 and the second on September 4, 2020.

**Kathryn Blake:** Professor Jim Tuten and I are here with Professor Emeritus of Philosophy Robert Wagoner during his birthday week. He turned 90 earlier this week, and we’re happy to take this opportunity to record some of his thoughts and get a little perspective about his collecting over the years. We have two exhibitions of a selection of his collection on view at the Juniata College Museum of Art. Those exhibitions were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic that we are in at the moment, but we are fortunate that we were able to extend them into Fall 2020 so that people have an opportunity to see this grouping of works. The current exhibit comprises only a small fraction of his entire collection that will eventually come to Juniata College.

**James Tuten:** We want to go back to the beginning of your lifetime of collecting art. Perhaps you could start by telling us about the first pieces you collected, how you acquired them, and how that led you to collecting other pieces.

**Robert Wagoner:** The very first piece? I’m not sure I remember. The very first one is not here in this show. The piece was by a Swiss artist whose name, for the moment, I can’t remember, and I bought it in a little bookstore on Harvard Square. The piece cost thirty or forty dollars. I thought I could afford it. The price was so reasonable because it was a re-strike, and I didn’t know enough about prints in order to recognize that. There is a line right through it which tells you that that it is a re-strike, a print that the artist

has abandoned. Instead of destroying the plate, which is what some artists do, he drew a diagonal line through it, which indicates, “If you want it, you can have it, but I’m no longer responsible for it.”

**Blake:** It’s not an original that the artist approved.

**Wagoner:** Even though it’s no longer an original print, I was still pleased to have it. The fact that the print was a re-strike didn’t diminish its significance to me. This is one of my son Nathan’s favorite prints and is still on my living room wall.

**Tuten:** Did you realize when you bought that piece that you were embarking on a future of collecting?

**Wagoner:** No, I wasn’t a collector then. I just thought the piece was interesting.

**Tuten:** At what point did you say, “Now I’m a collector, and I’m seeking art”?

**Wagoner:** Well, it took me a while. It seemed pretty cheeky at the time to announce myself as a collector when I was surrounded by people in Sotheby’s and Christie’s auction houses and elsewhere who were genuine collectors, connoisseurs who knew infinitely more about these works of art than I did. I was a mere beginner, and, at the time, I would not have said that I was a collector. Most of the art in these shows are acquisitions from later on when I was more self-conscious about being a collector. The *Basquiat*, for example, was a very deliberate acquisition, not because I thought it was pretty but because I thought it was important (see Figure 1 below).

**Blake:** Do you think your criteria for selecting an object have changed?

**Wagoner:** Yes, I’m more sophisticated about it now, and I got rid of the *pretty* criterion a long time ago. In fact, I avoid things that are pretty. I look for things that are dramatic, things which have some emotional power still in them because those things are more likely to last, whereas most prints that are pretty you’re tired of looking at after a week or two.

**Tuten:** You’ve said before that your colleague Klaus Kipphan had been quite influential on you as an art collector and as a lover of art.<sup>2</sup> For folks who don’t know him, could you say a little bit about who he is and how he influenced your collecting?

**Wagoner:** And his relationship to me? It’s kind of interesting. We, of course, had not known each other before coming to Juniata. I don’t know exactly why we became friends, but he is German and steeped in European culture, history, and languages. Of course, he’s fluent in German. He speaks French and, if you give him a chance, some Italian. I think he was looking for a friend with whom he could share some of these cultural similarities, so we did become friends. We traveled together to Germany and to France. He might have been with me in Italy. I was about the only other person out of the faculty with whom he could share all these things. We also were both conscripted to teach general education history courses like *The Medieval and Greek Mind*. But why were the two of us together? Because we were the

only ones who knew anything about European culture. I mean, it's a little embarrassing to have to admit that, but it was true, especially then but not as much now.



Figure 1. Collaboration between the estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat and The Skateroom, *Skateboard Triptych: In Italian*, 2014. Screenprint on maple; each board measures 31 ¼ x 8 in. Sold through [MoMA](#).

So we worked together in a European general education course we called From Decadence to Disaster. That referred mainly to the latter part of the nineteenth century and to World War I. I traveled with him a couple of times, too, to the home of his sister in Germany and became a good friend of her husband because he had learned to know American soldiers as a teenager. He is almost exactly the same age as me, just ever so slightly younger. He just missed the German draft. We shared all that.

We traveled in Germany. We went to auction houses in Germany. We bought some things together, but I realized pretty quickly that that's not something you can share with somebody else. In fact, I became adamant that I was not going to auction with Klaus anymore—not because I disliked him but

because our tastes paralleled each other and sometimes overlapped. He helped me sometimes, but we really didn't want to compete against one another even though some of the nice pieces that I have I have from him.

**Tuten:** Many years ago, you said something I have long been fascinated by: how you would take trips when the school year ended in the summer—sometimes you traveled solo, sometimes you traveled with Klaus Kipphan. I would love you to describe what one of those art collecting trips was like.

**Wagoner:** Most of the time I traveled solo, and if I was seriously on the hunt, I for sure traveled solo because I did not want somebody else influencing my decision. Many people assumed that my wife was involved in the same way, but she wasn't. She was not an art collector. She taught me some things about art, but she never went with me on a hunting trip if I went to Sotheby's or Christie's, to Keller's, or to Carl and Faber in Munich. I discovered fairly early on that I couldn't have somebody else whispering in my ear about a work of art. My choices had to be solely my decision by a criterion that I brought to it. I rather jealously took care of that kind of solitude because that's where decisions were made, or at least my decisions. I think Klaus discovered the same thing: you can't really share that. Nonetheless, we cheered each other on, and he was always as eager to show me new acquisitions as I was eager to show him. This went on for years.

Occasionally, I bought some things spontaneously just because something was for sale and I liked it. This was not very often though. Most of the time, the buying decisions were pretty calculated, and I sometimes bought things that I knew would fill a gap in my collection. There are still some things like that. If you turn me loose today and tell me to buy some other things for my collection, I wouldn't know what to look for.

**Blake:** You've been pretty disciplined in your collecting, more so than some collectors I've seen. What defines that discipline? What criteria did you have so that you would know where there was a gap?

**Wagoner:** Sometimes I didn't know there was a gap until I saw the piece that should fill it.

**Tuten:** Did you get most of your pieces at auctions, or did you collect at other places?

**Wagoner:** Most of them were at auction. In a sense, I piggybacked on the expertise of people who knew more than I did. I made use of their expertise, but that also jacked the price up, so you pay for that. But sometimes I found it helpful to realize that a competitor, somebody else who was also a collector, wanted the same thing I wanted. Sometimes that led me to pay more than I should. I got in the habit finally of going to auctions and sitting right up in front of the auctioneer. Originally, I didn't do that. I noticed that the dealers liked to sit, to hang out in the back of the room, and they would watch what other people were doing before they themselves committed to it. I thought, "Well, that's not too smart." You know, you give away your intentions right away if you hang out in the back of the room and only bid

after a while. And I'm a penny pincher. If I'm going to spend money, I want to be pretty sure that it's exactly what I want. It was a bit of a show; there are all kinds of little gamesmanship tricks. You would be surprised at the little games people play.

**Blake:** Let's talk about the kinds of themes that you are interested in collecting and how you gave a shape to the collection. You've chosen mostly portraits or images of faces.

**Wagoner:** They're images of faces really, not portraits. I have a couple that are portrait-like, but they're really not that interesting. They're usually posed pictures, and if they're real portraits, they don't carry a lot of emotional baggage. I'm looking for things that are going to speak to me. Things that are different in some expressive way. The word "drama" comes to mind again. You know, I look for things that have some dramatic punch to them. I'm not committed to any one historical period or any one style. If anything, I try to get diverse examples so that I can put them next to each other and see the originality of a particular piece.

**Blake:** Why that focus in particular? Is there anything in your background, where you grew up, anything that you think influenced that choice?

**Wagoner:** I thought images of faces were more interesting because you had to read the picture and identify with the faces to really understand some of them. I have a number that show the relationship between an older person and a youngster. I like them. They're expressive, or they mirror my experiences as a teacher. I know what that scene is like, what happened. I can identify with it. They express certain moods and situations that almost anybody can identify with. I was beginning to think in terms of leaving the collection to the College, and that caused me to think even further about their human significance, not just their artistic significance. I wanted them to be accessible to the neighborhood, as it were, to students and colleagues as well as to people in town. I think it's going to be tough to get tons of people in to look at them, but I left them to the College anyway."

**Blake:** There's a lot of conversation currently in museums about the liberal arts—that these opportunities to look at artworks or study the humanities are important to building empathy and developing that quality. I think that's what you're speaking to.

**Wagoner:** I think that's interesting. I didn't know that.

**Blake:** Do you have an artwork that you got at auction that maybe is your favorite? Not necessarily your favorite artwork, but your favorite "I got this" kind of moment?

**Wagoner:** Yes, several of them. I don't know if I can pick them out. The Beckmann work is one (see Figure 2 below). Beckmann is a very important German artist. I think *Irrenhaus* is one of the best ones that he's done. There are others. Nathan likes his paintings and is very committed to them. I'm not as taken with the paintings, but I like that print. I thought that print was smashing.

**Blake:** As you say, it's disturbing. It's not pretty.



Figure 2. Max Beckmann. *Irrenhaus*. 1918. Drypoint, 14 x 19 in.

**Wagoner:** No, it's not pretty. It's really kind of ugly, but that's typical of the Germans. I was glad to get that one. The print was for sale in, of all places, a bank, Stadtsparkasse in Marburg. They had a few Beckmanns for sale. The minute I saw it, I thought, "That's what I want." It fits. It's the sort of thing I look for.

**Blake:** But you weren't looking for art in a bank?

**Wagoner:** No, I wasn't looking for art in the bank.

**Blake:** But in collecting these images and in the way you were speaking about doing it, you feel that people can make that connection with what they're seeing?

**Wagoner:** Some of the images are quite provocative. I have, as you know, one print by the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, who is an artist practically everybody knows (see Figure 3 below). There's a man and a woman in the etching, and it's obviously a very tense relationship. It's not all hearts and flowers by any means. I tried to find pictures that had diverse examples of human interrelations, not necessarily happy ones. The Beckmann is a good example (see Figure 2).



Figure 3. Edvard Munch. *Conversation*. Etching and roulette, 14 3/16 x 18 7/8 in.

**Blake:** I think that speaks a lot to the potential use and enjoyment of the collection. And, as you say, art works aren't always meant to be happy.

**Wagoner:** Crucifixions, for example. That did sometimes affect what I bought. I sometimes would veer off course to get something that was really very expressive in human terms because I liked the strengths of it. The painting or print would, I hope, stimulate people to look at other things by the same artist or of the same or similar sort of problem. The Piranesi piece is interesting because it's in an imaginary prison and there is no such place, but Piranesi wanted to create a certain mood (see Figure 4 below). He imagined a place where people would be locked up for times endless.

The other thing that was in my mind frequently was that I tried to get pieces that were qualitatively important. That is, they would be registered in art history courses or the like. But the fact is that in most art history courses, you don't look at pictures. I thought, "If this were actually right there in the gallery, there would be no excuse for not looking at them." So that explains some of them. In the Munch, there are obviously some emotional problems in there (see Figure 3). We don't know whether

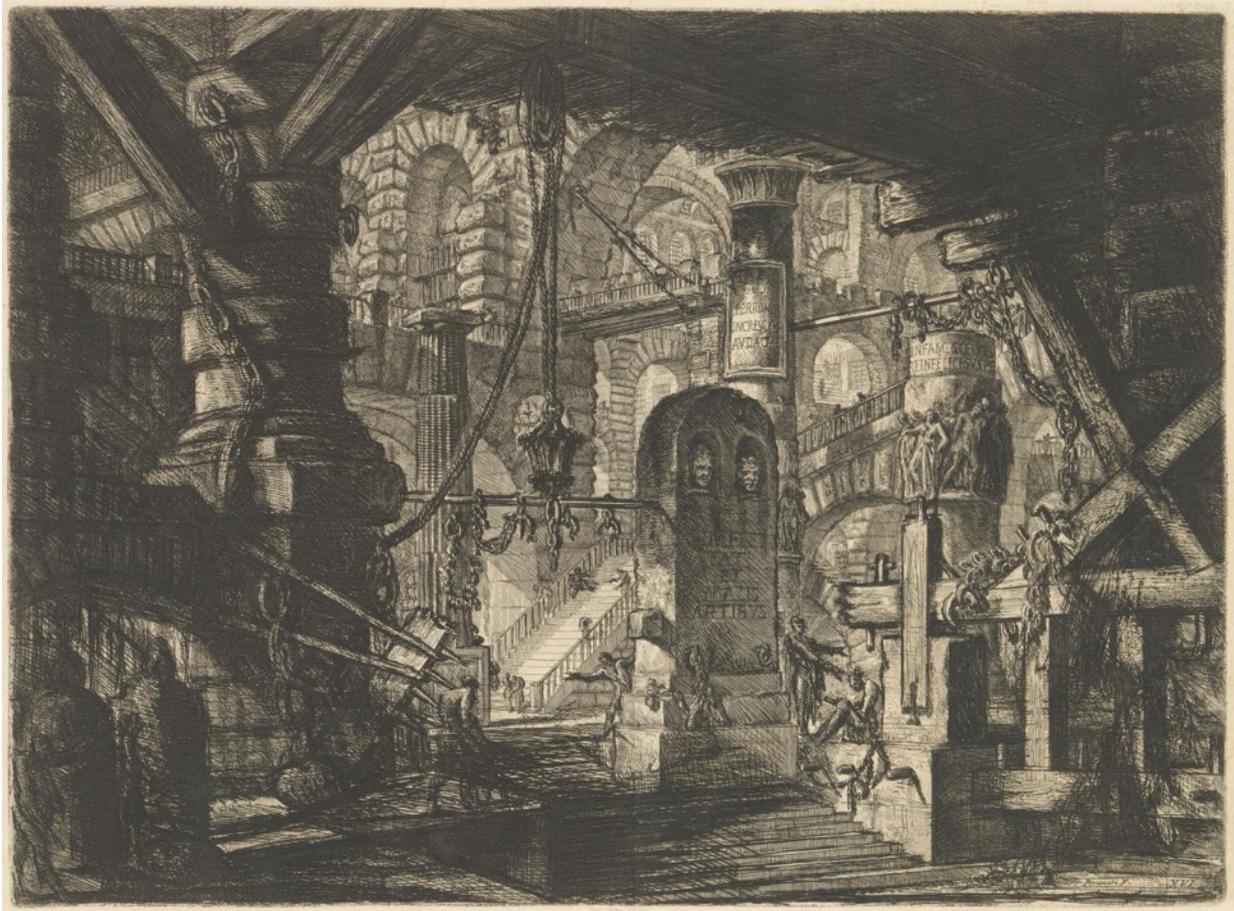


Figure 4. Giovanni Battista Piranesi. *The Pier with Chains*, from *Carceri d'Invenzioni*, 1749-50. Etching and engraving, 24 3/8 x 34 1/2 in.

this is his mother or his girlfriend, but whoever it is, he's in trouble. I think most men would recognize that.

**Blake:** It's in how Munch creates that tension.

**Wagoner:** Right. It comes right down to the way in which he used dry point to make the image. Dry point makes very sharp incisive lines. It's not a medium that you can look at comfortably. There's something about the sharpness of the line and the spontaneity of it that makes you pay attention to the emotional context.

**Blake** And that's the value of seeing an original art work.

**Wagoner:** Exactly so. That's where I was going. Usually in art history courses, what they see is in the textbook. After a while, you see the same pictures over and over again, but you really don't begin to identify with the artists themselves until you see diverse examples of what they are doing. You begin to see a certain kind of style, artistic as well as emotional. I was partly influenced by Klaus Kipphan when I bought the two scenes of death, of apocalypse; they're German (see Figure 5 below). It's an unpleasant subject matter, but it is moving nonetheless.



Figure 5. Above, Jan Sadeler I, after Stradanus, *Death Visiting the Poor*. Engraving, 17 1/8 x 21 in. Below, Raphael Sadeler, after Stradanus, *Death Striking the Rich*, c. 1595. Engraving, Flemish, 17 1/8 x 21 in. (framed).

As for *The Descent of the Antichrist*, I think I could make a pretty good case to show that it was probably made by Dürer himself when he was a young apprentice (see Figure 6). It doesn't say that, but if you look at some other works by Dürer of this same subject, you notice there are a lot of similarities, especially with the devils and the evil parsons who are beguiling the parishioners. I'm very fond of Dürer. I like the devils.



Figure 6. Michael Wolgemut, Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, Anton Koberger (publisher), Hartmann Schedel (publisher), *The Descent of the Antichrist*, from *Neue Weltchronik: The Seventh Age of Man*, 1493. Hand colored woodcut, 14 1/4 x 8 7/8 in.

I was surprised that two other works in the exhibition were hung together: *The Fool and the Woman* is by an enlightened German printmaker while *Express Stop* is by an American (see Figure 7). It had never occurred to me to put these two works together because historically they are so different. I was pleased to see this.



Figure 7. Left to right: Lucas van Leyden, *The Fool and the Woman*, 1520. Etching and engraving, 4 1/8 x 2 7/8 in. Douglas Warner Gorsline, *Express Stop*, 1948. Etching, 11 x 10 in.

**Blake:** How do you think your eye has developed, and what helped that process?

**Wagoner:** I'm more tolerant of things that don't fit the proper traditional artwork categories. The Basquiat's one I thought was very strange (see Figure 1 above). I expected to have a lot of trouble with that, bringing it back to Juniata. I didn't; the kids liked it.

**Blake:** How did you learn more over time, and how did you develop your eye?

**Tuten:** Did your training in ancient philosophy and history and, therefore, your familiarity with classical themes as well as your biblical knowledge influence your curatorship and purchase?

**Wagoner:** They did make a difference because I brought all of those interests to bear on informing myself about pieces that I was interested in. They also influenced my purchase of a lot of the pieces. Having Klaus as my companion in all this made a difference, too, because his knowledge of European history was better than mine. I could rely on his judgment about many pieces, but it was an unusual relationship.

I sometimes sat in on Karen Rosell's lectures.<sup>3</sup> Karen knows a lot about art history, but it wasn't always the sort of thing that interested me. I sometimes went along with her analyses, and sometimes I didn't. I didn't want the collection to be a textbook in art history, and one of the things that I wanted to accomplish was to pick up things that were not typical of that particular artist. I hoped that it would help educate kids to see something other than the ordinary, and I did that rather deliberately. Take the Beckmann, for example (see Figure 2 above). I wanted students and youth to see just how ugly a painting or a picture could be.

**Blake:** One thing that's valuable about your collecting is that you've been pretty meticulous in noting where you got something and the research that you did to document what it was and why it might be considered important in terms of art history or a critical approach. To researchers or people interested in your collection, that's a valuable resource. I can see what trips you took.

**Wagoner:** Oh yes, you could figure that out.

**Blake:** Because you note where you bought a piece, the date you bought it, what you paid for it.

**Wagoner [Jokingly]:** You're not supposed to tell.

**Blake:** I won't tell.

**Tuten:** How were you able to take your salary as a professor at a small college and build this collection?

**Wagoner:** Well, there are ways you can cheat. Not all works of art are first-rate. Sometimes the works of art are second- or third-rate, and then the question is whether it is original enough for you to invest money in it or not or whether it's simply a repetition of something else the artist has done. Some artists keep repeating themselves over and over again, and there are those that are more original in the things that they make. Even a small painting or print can be quite original, whereas, sometimes, these small ones are potboilers. There are pictures that were painted or engraved because the artist needed to have a dinner ticket, and so he just tosses one off that he can do without even thinking about it. There are, as you know, clichés in art just as there are clichés in short stories.

**Tuten:** Did you feel self-consciously as though you were using money to buy art that you might have used for other purposes?

**Wagoner:** I've never owned a new car, for example. To me it seemed to be a waste of money if there's all this wonderful art that you can have and live with as part of your life, whereas the car in two or three years is going to fall apart. There are other things I could have spent the money on, but since it's my money, I can spend it anyway I want to. That gave me a kind of freedom. I didn't have to do anything with it. I could use it. I could spend money on something that, from most points of view, was frivolous.

**Tuten:** I know that there was also a period when you had a business with Klaus.

**Wagoner:** I hate to admit that we did. He was more reluctant, but we did it in my wife Shirley's apartment in Washington, which we turned into an art gallery. We sold a few things, but my heart wasn't in it. I did try it for a while, and it was kind of a fun adventure, but one of the things I discovered is that I hated to sell things. I hated it. I didn't want to sell them. I wanted them all for myself, and what kind of dealer is that? A dealer who won't let go of their works?! It didn't last very long because I don't think either one of us had our hearts in it. I remember I once had a fabulous print by Albrecht Dürer that I sold at a nice price. I hated myself for that ever since. Why in the hell did I sell it?

I began buying art simply for my own satisfaction. And people would ask me from time to time, "What are you going to do with these works?" That raised embarrassing questions. What was I going to do with them? I had not thought that through. I was doing this pretty spontaneously simply because they were things that I was interested in. Then I went further in developing criteria for the kinds of pieces I had. I couldn't just buy everything I liked. That would be madness. The question was, "What kind of character did I want my collection to have?" I still hadn't answered the question: What am I going to do with it at all?

**Blake:** But you did organize exhibitions for the college? I don't know that everyone now knows that there were exhibitions in this building before it was a museum.

**Wagoner:** Well, it took a while. Klaus and I worked at it pretty hard. The building didn't look as nice as it does now by any means. We did the shows here until the time of the icon show, but by then we changed presidents. I would say I did not have the same relationship with [President] Binder that I had with Bob Neff.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Neff was president let me get away with a lot of things that I didn't have any authority for, and he tolerated them. I dedicated one of the shows to him as president of the College, a whole show organized around art that had some kind of religious or biblical significance or both. That was kind of fun. I even went all the way to London to borrow some of those pieces and got away with it. I can still hardly believe that these hard-nosed art dealers would let me have prints and drawings to put in a show, but it was in their interest to get as much exposure as they could.

**Tuten:** You had new shows at a brisk pace. It must have been very involving.

**Wagoner:** Yes, most people did not understand quite what they were, but we had a lot of people come to those shows. I think there were nine or ten of them. In terms of popular appeal, they were fairly successful. Klaus and I had fun. We worked very hard because we had to cut every single one of those mats. We had to buy the frames and put them together. There wasn't anybody else to hand that over to. We had to learn a lot of hard lessons on our feet, and that's literally true. We would be exhausted after working over here all evening to get ready for a show, just absolutely worn out, but we could point to real works of art as examples of what such and such an artist would do and that was the ultimate goal. That still is my goal for bringing the collection to the College.

**Tuten:** I had not realized how much you and Klaus worked together doing those shows.

**Wagoner:** Oh, we did, but there were a couple shows that I did all on my own. The icon show was a solo performance. It was incredible. That was a life-changing experience, really, in many ways. Since we were teaching courses about European culture, we knew it would be a good idea to put on an exhibition. That had never been done here before, believe it or not. There had been shows here before, but they had been mostly ad hoc exercises on the spur of the moment by Sandy McBride or even Steve Barbash.<sup>5</sup> We overlapped a little bit there. But it was mainly Klaus and I who did this. And of course, the big one, the biggest show of all was the show of Russian icons.



Figure 8. Professor Robert Wagoner speaking to students during *Russian Icons of the Golden Age* on exhibition in the Shoemaker Gallery, April 4-30, 1988. Photo credit: Juniata College Archives, unknown photographer.

**Tuten:** I think you told me that you were so concerned about security for that show that you took some extraordinary personal measures.

**Wagoner:** I had to promise the people I borrowed icons from that I would keep them under twenty-four-hour security. I don't know what I thought I was going to do because I didn't have twenty-four-hour security here in this building. I talked to the local police chief and told him my problem.<sup>6</sup> He said, "All right. I'll take care of it." I asked, "What are you going to do?" He arranged to have a police car come by the building every night at certain appointed times to keep an eye on things and come in if necessary. He never had to. And just to be doubly certain, I slept in the same building. That way, I could say it was under my security twenty-four hours every day. I could guarantee that. The Harrisburg newspaper *The Patriot News* came to interview me about the show, and I told them that I slept here every night.<sup>7</sup> The reporter put that as the lead line in the newspaper, and it enabled me the next day to brag to everybody I saw: "I slept with saints and angels last night. Who did you sleep with?"

Nathan and I worked extremely hard to sleep in the same building as the paintings during the night because we had lights way up high. The only way to get up and down was with long step ladders, which we had, but we spent all night, literally until two or three in the morning, running up and down those ladders getting the lights just right because the way the light fell on the icons made the whole difference in how they looked (see Figure 8 above). It was a life-changing experience.

The next morning, Don [Steele], one of the people who were helping provide security, said he would go get George Dolnikowski and bring him to see what it looked like since it had been his idea to have an icon show to begin with.<sup>8</sup> It wasn't my idea—that was crazy. I didn't know a thing about icons. Don went to get him, and it was six o'clock in the morning. He brought him in the door, and I walked him around the perimeter of both wings of the museum. Tears just rolled down his face. He was so moved by it. I've never seen anything quite like that. For him, it was a taste of home that he had been without for twenty to thirty years. It was a very moving experience.

Incidentally, Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum had loaned me three pieces for the show. Initially, I asked about it, and they said, "Oh no, we can't. We never loan panel paintings; we just don't do that." I said, "Come on now. I'm a Harvard PhD. Do you think I'm going to steal them? You've got to help me make this a full show." And I'll be darned. Harvard University loaned me three icons.

**Blake:** That's quite a coup. I couldn't do that now.

**Wagoner:** I thought, "That was the high point of it," when I got Harvard to support. They sent the icons by courier. They wouldn't just use the regular package service. They had to have a regular courier. Then, when the show was over, the courier took them back. I felt like I had been certified or ratified or something. That was exciting. It really was exciting.

**Tuten:** So there are particular pieces we want to look at together.

**Blake:** You've pointed out a few of the images. When we were choosing what prints to put up, every time I went to your house you wanted me to see more. You always bring out comparisons. So why

don't you talk about these four (see Figure 9)? How are they related? Why do you do that? What do you think is important about the comparison?



Figure 9. Clockwise from top left: Albrecht Dürer, *The Elevation of Mary Magdalene*, 1505. Woodcut, 8 ½ x 5 ¾ in.  
 Raffaello Schiaminossi, after Luca Cambiaso, *The Assumption of Mary Magdalene*, 1612. Etching, 13 x 9 ½ in.  
 Martin Schongauer, *The Flagellation*, c. 1483. Engraving, 6 3/8 x 4 5/8 in. Rodin, *Le Printemps, Spring*, 1882-88.  
 Drypoint, 10 7/8 x 7 5/8 in.

**Wagoner:** Dürer's *The Elevation of Mary Magdalene* (see Figure 9 above, top left) was one of my early acquisitions. I bought it in New York at Sotheby's, but I think it's an excellent print. Of course, it's not biblical because this did not happen. It's a made-up scene of Mary Magdalene ascending to the heavens during the hours of prayer. Below her is another monk doing the same thing. I was intrigued by all the little putti that are crowded around her, and, of course, her nudity. It's one of the few excuses that artists had to paint a nude woman, not that they always jumped at it. Dürer was no exception. But it's an excellent print as a woodcut.

Some years later, I was at auction in London, and Schiaminossi's *The Assumption of Mary Magdalene* came up (see Figure 9 above, top right). I saw it and thought, "I've got to have it," simply because it was a mate to Dürer's. It is Italian instead of German, and it is just more flowery than anything Dürer would ever do, but it made a kind of interesting companion. Later still, I came on the Rodin print (see Figure 9, bottom left) and realized that it was a companion to these others. I felt that I had to have it. So I bought it.

Dürer and Schiaminossi included putti. Rodin included babies. What Rodin did was to steal the image from Dürer and Schiaminossi, the Italian artist. He stole the image there, made an entirely different image out of it. The Dürer has to do with sanctity and spiritual otherness, whereas the Rodin has to do with fertility. Oh boy, does it ever! I think it's a fascinating combination. It's a good example of how artists steal from each other. And I'm convinced that Rodin stole the image, but he made an entirely different image out of it.

*Flagellation* doesn't match the others, but it is by another German artist who is virtually a contemporary of Dürer's: Martin Schongauer (see Figure 9, bottom right). I got it not because it's related to these but simply because of its very Gothic character. It doesn't pretend to be pretty. It doesn't pretend to be religiously significant. It's very, very human because the soldiers here who are administering punishment to Jesus are pretty ugly. I liked the ugliness. Schongauer did that a number of times; this is a typical Schongauer piece. It was made about the same time as these others.

**Blake:** What about the Elizabeth Catlett piece (see Figure 10 below)? You own more than one work by her.

**Wagoner:** Yes, I've got two. She lived to be my age; she was in her 90s when she died.<sup>9</sup> She was a sculptor, actually. That was her first love, but she was also a painter and engraver. Of the two pieces I have by her, one of them is very sculptural in the way in which it is modeled. She deliberately did that to carry the perspective of the sculptor into things that ordinarily are works of art on paper. It's not in this show, though. *Cartas* I thought was a knockout. I told you that I had to have it when I saw it coming up for sale. I had to have it, no argument.

**Tuten:** So you bought that at auction as well?



Figure 10. Elizabeth Catlett. *Cartas*, 1986. Lithograph, 30 x 22 in.

**Wagoner:** Yeah. It was a little pricey. Nathan hollers at me because he thinks I should get a decent hearing aid, but instead I keep spending the money on works of art. He can't understand that.

**Blake:** What about the Francis Bacon work (see Figure 11 below)?

**Wagoner:** I think that is a very impressive piece. Generally, it reveals the opinion that Bacon had about human beings. You can see in the way he's used the color lines that he sees human existence in a kind of decadent moment in which the perfection of the classical ideal is brushed aside and instead we see human nature as it decays. Most of the Bacons are like that. I'm in the market for another Bacon, but I haven't been able to get one that I like. I'm running out of money though, so if I bring the collection to the museum at Juniata College, that may end my collecting. Whatever your concept of human nature is, it's going to disclose itself in these pictures.

The Helleu and Matisse works, for example, are interesting. They're both French from about the



Figure 11. Francis Bacon. *Study for Portrait II (After the Life Mask of William Blake)*, 1955. Lithograph, 23 5/8 x 19 5/8 in.

same time period but are very different works with very different ideas about what it is to be human (see the top two images in Figure 12 below). When you start comparing them to some of the ones like the Giacometti, for example, you get the same message about the temporality of human nature (see the bottom image in Figure 12 below). The momentariness of it.

**Blake:** This to speaks to your visual memory. You remember what you have, and you seek out other objects that will complement them.

**Wagoner:** Or sometimes contrast with them.

**Blake:** Hopefully, that is not a skill that is dying. But I think the fact that we always have objects, like cameras, that carry images for us rather than carrying them in our brains gives us a different way of building collections and interacting.



Figure 12. Clockwise from top left: Paul César Helleu, *Le Nœud Bleu*, 1905. Drypoint, 25 ¼ x 16 ¾ in. Henri Matisse, *Martiniquaise au Décolleté*, 1947. Lithograph, 13 3/8 x 8 1/8 in. Alberto Giacometti, *Head of a Man*, from *Derrière le Miroir*, No. 127, May 1961, 1961. Lithograph, 15 x 11 in.

**Wagoner:** And I thought that to have an art gallery as beautiful as this building is and not to make more use of it is just a crime. I was delighted to have things hanging here because they fit the setting pretty well. Finally. I mean, it's taken us years to refurbish these two rooms, and I was out of the business by the time they got around to doing some of these things. They took a long time.

**Blake:** Are there any others you want to point out as particular favorites?

**Wagoner:** Some of them are just for fun. They are just make-believe pictures about naughty ladies. Here's one (see Figure 13). I think that's a great drawing, but it's not one that people like.

**Blake:** It's a dramatic subject.

**Wagoner:** One thing that is interesting is that if you look at Salome's face, it is the face of a teenage kid who's spoiled. And actually, even though she's cute, the head of John the Baptist is actually more tender or more feminine than her face.



Figure 13. Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (Guercino), *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist*, 17<sup>th</sup> century. Black chalk, 9 1/8 x 11 3/4 in.

**Blake:** You've been generous to loan these to us for a while, and you must be missing them.

**Wagoner:** No. I have missed some, but I've got other ones. I think they're well displayed. I like the exhibition very much. Well done.

**Blake:** Thank you. The students arranged the installations, but this exhibit I hung because we were closed.

**Wagoner:** Well, it hasn't had any exposure really.

**Blake:** It's a collaboration. Our students met with you and talked about some of the works. Then they made these pairings and laid out the exhibitions. It's great experience for them to work with artworks of such quality and to be able to share those with their peers and also with the public.

**Wagoner:** I would hope so.

## NOTES

1. "Exhibitions: The Robert Wagoner Collection." *The Juniata College Museum of Art*. Accessed May 26, 2022, <https://www.juniata.edu/academics/museum/exhibitions/wagoner-collection.php>.
2. Klaus Kipphan is professor emeritus of history. He taught at Juniata College from 1965 to 2004.
3. Karen Rosell is professor emerita of art history. She taught at Juniata College from 1986 to 2020.
4. Frederick M. Binder was president of Juniata College from 1975 to 1986. Robert W. Neff succeeded Binder as Juniata College president from 1986-1998. Neff earned both a PhD and a doctor of divinity degree, leading to Wagoner's dedicating a show of religious art to President Neff.
5. Alexander 'Sandy' McBride was professor of art at Juniata College from 1970 until his retirement in 2008. Steven Barbash taught art at Juniata College from 1960 to 1970 before taking a position at SUNY Cortland.
6. Dan Varner was the Huntingdon police chief from 1978 to 2008 (Polly McMullin. "Varner Says He Is 'Honored' to Receive Good Scout Award," *The Daily News* (Huntingdon, PA), June 3, 2009.
7. *The Patriot* (Harrisburg, PA) was published from 1891 to 1996. After merging with the *Evening News* (Harrisburg, PA), it changed its name to *The Patriot-News* (Harrisburg, PA) beginning in 1997. The article appeared as Sandy Cullen, "An Exhibit of Russian Icons Draws Watch," *The Patriot-News* (Harrisburg, PA), April 24, 1988.
8. According to his obituary (*Juniata Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2011, 95), George Dolnikowski, professor emeritus of German and Russian, was born in Russia and conscripted to join the Russian Army in 1941. After having been taken captive, he spent four years in a prisoner of war camp. "Sponsored by the Church of the Brethren, he was resettled at Juniata in 1949 . . . he earned a bachelor's degree in 1952 from Juniata and began teaching at the College the same year." He retired in 1989. [Editor's note: Although the obituary reports that Dolnikowski, spelled incorrectly there as Dolnikowsky, retired in 1989, it was actually in 1988.]
9. Elizabeth Catlett died on April 2, 2012.